

Caged Birds as Pets

Our topics for this week are:

- **The history of caged birds as pets**
- **Popular caged bird pets**
- **Normal behavior of caged pet birds**

Pet Bird History

Birds have been kept in cages for their beauty and companionship for more than 4,000 years. Ancient Egyptians kept doves, pigeons, and parrots as pets and ancient Greek aristocracy kept mynahs and parakeets. Egyptians and Persians used homing pigeons to carry messages 3,000 years ago. Royalty and the very wealthy kept companion birds during Medieval and Renaissance Europe. In the 15th century, canaries were bred in captivity to be placed in underground mines to detect poisonous gasses.

When the Aztecs were conquered by the Spanish in 1521, the Palace of Moctezuma I, (Montezuma) in Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) had a caged bird zoo and one for birds of prey. Other cities in the Aztec empire also had birds in zoos.

There are about 9,000 known species of birds. The largest order is Passeriformes, containing the perching birds (canaries, finches, mynahs). Passerines have three front toes and one back toe on each foot. They are also known as song birds for their ability to vocalize melodies. The order Psittaciformes contains the most popular companion birds (parrots, cockatoos, macaws, lorries, and budgerigars). Psittacines have two toes in front and two back toes on each foot. Their beaks are hooked which they use for climbing, breaking nuts, and defense. Toucans are the only common companion birds in the order Piciformes. Toucans have large pointed bills which can be as long as their body. Pigeons and doves are in the order Columbiformes. This order is characterized by small head and beak, large wings, and a bobbing movement of their head. They have excellent flying ability.

Caged companion birds include a wide variety of birds. Some can learn to mimic the human voice, such as budgerigars, cockatiels, and African Grey and Yellow-naped Amazons. Some birds, such as canaries, like to live alone while others, such as finches, prefer living in small groups.

Cockatiels and budgerigars (parakeets, *Melopsittacus undulates*) are the easiest birds to manage for new bird owners. Both are very social and need frequent interaction with other birds or humans. Budgerigars are the most popular companion birds. They are smaller and less expensive to own but more flighty and willing to bite when irritated.

Popular passerines are canaries and finches. Canaries prefer to live alone. Finches prefer to live in small groups. Neither canaries nor finches tolerate handling well.

Many popular caged companion birds are exotic to the U.S. The budgerigar and cockatiel came from Australia. The canary came from the Canary Islands. African Grey parrots are from west and central Africa. The Rosy-faced Lovebird is from the Namib Desert. The Common Hill Myna comes from south and southeast Asia, and the Common Myna is from India and Australia. The Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992 prohibited importation of most exotic wild birds into the U.S.

Wild caught parrots cannot be imported into the U. S. or Europe. Export of all native birds of Australia has been banned since 1960. Some wild caught Central and South American parrots are still smuggled into the U.S. from Mexico.

Natural Behavior of Companion Birds

Birds are social animals that preferably live in groups (flocks). Flocks provide added protection, scouting for food sources, and mutual grooming in areas of the body not reachable to groom unassisted. Small nomadic species, such as budgerigars, congregate in large groups for protection from predators. Pair bonding is weaker in nomadic birds than in larger species that are more territorial as with South American parrots. Conversely, attempts to establish dominance over others is less intense with small nomadic species compared to large territorial birds.

Vision and taste are birds' predominant senses. Vocalization can be very complex. Vocalization helps coordinate activities such as foraging for food and announcing time to roost and aids in locating mates, establishing territories, and alerts to danger. Birds that make loud noises, such as screams, are species that will mingle with other avian species in the wild. Birds that do not mingle with other avian species are quieter.

Birds clean and align their feathers by preening, using their mouth to stroke their feathers. They also coat their feathers with an oil from their uropygial gland near the tail while preening. The oil helps waterproof their feathers. Preening occurs after bathing and eating. Social birds may allopreen, i.e., preen each other.

Other than mutual grooming, birds do not normally use physical force for interactions among each other. Communications, including dominant aggression, involve vocalizations, posturing, blocking access to resources, and position within the immediate surroundings. Apprehension is often indicated by an open beak while leaning away from an object or handler. Fighting is reserved primarily for territorial disputes. Play activities build combat and mating skills and assists in determination of social rank.

Birds do not possess a diaphragm. Their lungs are always filled with air. Air sacs are able to move air in and out. Some of the air from air sacs are delivered to the bones providing some distributed warmth in cold weather, dissipation of heat in warm weather, and adding buoyancy when in water for water birds. Heat stress causes panting as a last resort and, in some species, rapid fluttering of the throat. Exposure to cold weather leads to fluffing of feathers to trap insulating pockets of air, and sitting on their feet to keep their feet warm.

Bird mannerisms include alternating pupil dilation and constriction and flaring tail feathers when excited. Wings are spread when acting secure. Puffing out its feathers momentarily or wagging its tail signals a greeting.

The major activities are being on alert for predators and foraging for food. Although both can be stressful, these activities are important in maintaining normal mental health and behavior.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Birds have been kept as companion pets for more than 4,000 years.**
- 2. Nearly all companion birds in the U.S. are species not indigenous to the U.S.**
- 3. Large territorial birds, such as parrots, are more aggressively dominant than smaller migratory species like budgerigars.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 200 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.